# Realist studies of oppression, emancipation and resistance

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**Abstract:**

This article introduces two papers in a special section of this journal. It explains why realist studies of oppression, emancipation and resistance are needed. We trace the development of studies in this area, noting their Marxist roots, divergence with post-structural theorising and more recent critical realist advancements. We conclude by highlighting the weaknesses in studies of this area and by arguing that progress is important for understanding how emancipation from oppression might be possible.

**Key words**: Critical Realism, emancipation, oppression, resistance

## Faces of oppression and resistance: old and new

Despite a century of all but continuous growth in global wealth and productivity, income gains in the West, at least since the late 1970s, have remained primarily in the hands of the 0.1% (Alvaredo et al. 2017). Consequentially, disparities in health, education and social mobility have also worsened, especially in those countries which are more unequal (Piketty 2017). Yet, this accumulation and denial of wealth, health and happiness is no accident and can be traced to a complex mix of neo-liberal mechanisms which have contributed to the oppression of workforces across the globe.

The oppressive mechanisms of 21st century capitalism combine the old and new in their substance and effects. Thus, whilst practices such as slavery, insecure work, low wages, and colonial exploitation, are themes as familiar to historians as to scholars of modern organizations, more recent techniques and technologies such as off-shore banking, robots, credit default swaps, and information technology have provided modern elites with new mechanisms to appropriate capital, degrade workers, and delegitimise the mechanisms of resistance and emancipation (Moore et al. 2017). Together, these and other phenomena, have generated complexes of oppressive practices that are familiar to 21st century workers: extreme forms of technological control and automation, the casualisation of work, the low minimum wage, the gig economy, exploitative international supply chains, and debt-laden households. Such mechanisms do not exist in a vacuum. Indeed, they depend upon material, cultural and discursive contexts for their actualisation, legitimation and reproduction. Moreover, such mechanisms operate at a variety of levels from the individual to the transnational: Trump's tweets about *'bringing the jobs home'* are, for example, intricately linked with an increasingly disenfranchised and impoverished working class in the USA, the 'race to the bottom' in low-wage economies, and the rise of nationalism and isolationism in economic policy (Gest 2016).

A similar mix of old and new mechanisms operating at a variety of levels is also true of those who seek to *resist* oppression at work and emancipate others. Old practices of resistance such as strikes, the refusal of work, and the harnessing of public outrage have also been added to, and transformed, by modern political, technological and social contexts. For example, the globalisation of the 'Justice for Janitors' movement, was accelerated by a variety of old and new mechanisms operating at a number of levels: from hunger-strikes and alliances with the clergy, to high profile documentaries and social media campaigns (Dencik and Wilkin 2015).

In seeking to explain and understand exploitation, oppression or resistance, reductive approaches, those that seek to explain the oppression world solely in terms of, say, events, actor-networks or discourse (e.g. Roberts 2005, Thomas et al. 2005, Lee and Hassard 1999), face at least three challenges. The first is that reductive approaches struggle to provide multi-agent or multi-level analyses that include, for example social structures, people, discourses, social relations and technologies operating in different ways at individual, group, organisational and international levels. Instead, their tendency is to focus on the local, immediate or measurable, resulting in 'thin' descriptions and weak explanations (Brannan et al. 2016, O'Mahoney and Vincent 2014). The second is that reductive explanations often adhere to a relativist ontology and thus tend to put the word *truth* in quotation marks. The difficulty with this for studies of oppression is that if all truths (including ethical truths) are relative, then one person's oppression may simply be another person's emancipation, and there is no objective ground to judge one perspective, or indeed theorisation of that perspective, over the other (Thompson 2004). Indeed, the concept of emancipation suggests that alternative narratives or discourses need to be constructed, but how is this task to be attempted if there is no basis by which to judge them better, or truer, than existing ones? Thirdly, as *people* in reductionist approaches are often presented as mere assemblages, events, or discursive 'subject positions' (e.g. Musson et al. 2007, Bloomfield and Vurdubakis 1999), generally lacking the theoretical basis for 'internal' capacities such as rationality, reflexivity or emotion, it is difficult for these positions to conceptualise how resistance can occur (Fleetwood 2008).

This is not to suggest that reductionist approaches have not generated important insights into the oppression of workers, but that these insights are often despite, rather than because of, their ontological commitments. Indeed, to adequately conceptualise social activity many reductionist accounts make *de facto* use of realist assumptions in texts which ostensibly reject realist principles (O'Mahoney et al. 2016, O'Mahoney 2011). This is perhaps unsurprising as the complexities outlined above suggest that oppression, resistance and emancipation cannot be analysed adequately without a non-reductive, multi-level analysis that is sensitive to the relations and distinctions between people, material artefacts, social structures, discourses and organisations. It is here that we believe realist theory, especially critical realism, can help.

**The first wave: Marxism, structuralism et al.**

Whilst early managerialist interventions in organisations, such as those of Taylor or Ford, were unashamedly positivist, or at least pseudo-scientific, in their approaches (Blau and Meyer 1971), early workplace *studies* were often based, at least implicitly, on realist assumptions, adhering to principles such as a distinction between ontology and epistemology, a commitment to causality, and a non-reductionist conceptualisation of the person. Weber's materialist analyses, for example, whilst emphasising an interpretivist methodology, adhered to a Kantian (realist) distinction between the empirical world and the world of intelligibility (Koch 1994), and rejected a Humean (positivist) notion of causation (Ringer 2000). Durkheim, to take another example, clearly held society to be real *sui*

*generis*, and that epistemologically and methodologically, social facts should be treated as real objects with causal powers. Yet whilst these writers, and others (e.g. Commons, Veblen, Mills, Polanyi and Bourdieu), used realism to provide insights into the malaises of the modern condition, and thus the oppression of people, their focus was often more description than emancipation, and their ontological commitments were rarely explicated in detail. Although there were significant realist precursors that were concerned with emancipation (e.g. Jean-Jacques Rousseau or François Charles Fourier) the major social and theoretical development for emancipation studies was, and continues to be, Karl Marx.

The foundations of Marx's historical and dialectical materialism spurred a wealth of realist studies examining the causes of workplace oppression, the forms of resistance and the possibilities of emancipation. Whilst these need little introduction here (Brown et al. 2002) it is pertinent to note that Marx provided a complex realist metaphysics, arguing for a structural, emergent, dialectic, and essentialist ontology linking human phenomena such as labour power, knowledge, false consciousness, and alienation, with structural features such class conflict and modes of production (Bhaskar, 1979; Lukács 1978). Concerning organisation studies, the influence, and development, of Marxist thought emerged in the post-war fields of the sociology of work, especially concerning conflict (Hyman 1972; Nichols and Benyon 1977), and in the emergence of the 'Labour Process' tradition, following the work of Braverman (1974) and others. Concerning the latter, studies developed insights into modern practices of control and resistance in the workplace, whilst often (although not always) losing the revolutionary urges in traditional Marxist fare (e.g. Edwards 1979, Edwards and Scullion 1982).

It was not resistance, however, but labour process theory's neglect of employee subjectivity, as well as the potential contribution of these works towards rather than against oppression, that prompted its critique by Burawoy (1985) and others. This, together with the entrance of post-modern philosophy into European business schools, led to the rise of the 'Manchester School' (Knights & Morgan 1991; Willmott 1994) and the wider linguistic turn in organisation studies. Here, 'subjugation' and 'construction' took the place of 'oppression', to reveal more diffuse, unowned and circular nature of discursive power in organisations. Yet, the constructionists' rejection of objectivity or rationality rendered an adequate conceptualisation of resistance problematic (Reed 2000). These and other critiques led many social constructionists to shift their attention away from macro-studies of discourse, and towards local contexts, exploring 'micro-resistance…..where workers can seek spaces for escape' (Taylor and Bain 2003: 1489) and 'micro-emancipation' as alternatives to the 'large scales challenges to capitalism or management' (Huault et al. 2014).

This turn from the realist to the discursive was paralleled in feminist and colonialist studies of oppression, resistance and emancipation. Early approaches were generally implicitly or explicitly realist (and often neo-Marxist) in their identification of racism or patriarchy in society and at work as generated through social structures (e.g. Amott and Matthaei 1991; Engels 1972). Thus, feminist and post-colonial analyses of oppression focused on the identification of a mismatch between women's' or ethnic minority needs and what society or the workplace offered, and their resistance was framed in terms of their solidarity and the representation of oppressed groups (e.g. Ahonen and Tienari 2015 , Prasad 2003). Yet, the rejection of any real biological or psychological traits of oppressed groups was, for a new wave of discourse theorists, inherently essentialist, and studies concerned with the needs of groups, it was argued, often simply universalised white, Western, or male experiences and were therefore oppressive in themselves (Carter 2000, New 1998).

Yet, in workplace, colonial and feminist studies, many felt that the human baby had been thrown out with the essentialist bathwater (Reed 1997, Thompson and Ackroyd 1995). In the latter part of the twentieth century, this, combined with the limitations of reductionist approaches in conceptualising

resistance prompted a realist backlash that has grown significantly since the turn of the millennium. It is to this that we now turn.

**The second wave: critical realism et al.**

There are several reasons why academics dissatisfied with both the flimsiness of positivism and the anti-humanism of post-structuralism in understanding oppression, resistance and emancipation welcome critical realism (Bhaskar 1975, Bhaskar 1979) and its developments in social theory (Archer 2003, Sayer 2011). First, its stratified ontology commits to the possibility of a concept of the human *sui generis:* irreducible to structure, action, discourse, materiality, or any other phenomena. This is crucial not only descriptively, in the sense that humans provide the unit of analysis for any study of oppression (what is being oppressed if not people?) but also ethically - if the humans are only discourse, or action, then *why does it matter* whether they are being oppressed or not? (Sayer 2011). Second, critical realism is *ontologically* critical. Whilst maintaining a commitment to better truths discoverable through judgemental rationality, critical realism adheres to an epistemological relativism which recognises the obfuscating dangers of the discursive realm. This is important because the sources and mechanisms of oppression, especially ideology, are frequently disguised. Thus, unlike constructionist approaches that must take all discourses as equally valid (as there is no objective knowable truth), critical realism argues that some discourses are more accurate reflections of reality than others, and that some forms of ideology are inherently more oppressive than others. Third, critical realism, or at least its application in social theory, is *ethically* critical. By committing to the properties of an entity, CR also commits to the *potential* of those properties within specific contexts: an acorn has the potential to grow into an oak in the right environment. Realists such as Sayer (2011) or Smith (2010), draw on capability theorists such as Sen (1999) to argue that, similarly, humans have a capacity to flourish in the right contexts. The identification and removal of mechanisms which oppress human flourishing are, therefore, an ethical priority for such authors.

The sophisticated foundation provided by critical realism has provided organisation studies with several benefits. First, it has not only prompted a variety of studies of oppression and resistance (e.g. Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000, Fleetwood and Ackroyd 2004), but also examined new contexts and mechanisms for the extraction of surplus labour (Jenkins and Delbridge 2014, Elder-Vass 2016) and identified novel forms of resistance (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999). Second, critical realism has provided support to feminist (Clegg 2006), colonial (Ram et al. 2013, Garcia 2012, Porter 1993) and Marxist (Brown et al. 2012) studies, by highlighting the stratified, structural nature of oppression, and using the distinctions between agency, structure and culture (including discourse) to highlight opportunities for resistance and emancipation. Third, realists have built upon and extended the work of social constructionists. For example, Fairclough's (2005, 2002) critical realist interpretation of discourse theory has prompted several studies to explore the (non-conflationary) relationships between social structure, materiality and discourse in generating oppressive conditions (e.g. Sims-Schouten and Riley 2014). Fourth, as critical realism 'is methodologically ecumenical' (Vincent and O'Mahoney 2018: 60) it has used diverse combinations of methods and forms of analysis to uncover the mechanisms of oppression (Edwards et al. 2014). For example, (Olsen 2001) uses a novel combination of qualitative research and factor analysis to explore gender segregation in the Indian labour markets, whilst Sam Porter (1993) uses a new approach to ethnography to explore racism in the medical professions.

As discussed earlier, critical realism is not the only realist game in town, and a variety of realisms have recently been used to study oppression, resistance and emancipation outside the Bhaskarian lineage.

These are not limited to, but include work based on MacIntyre (Finchett-Maddock 2015); Polanyi (Levien and Paret 2012), Bourdieu (Dick 2008); Nussbaum (Sayer 2007), and Goffman (Bolton and Boyd 2003). There are also interesting realist developments on emancipation in the sociology of religion (Wight 2006). As these approaches are often based around 'mid-range theory' they are often, though not always, used with a critical realist underpinning. The congruence between critical realism and other forms of theorising raises an important point about the extent to which critical realism can be identified in other theoretical traditions, even in those that ostensibly reject the meta-theory. It is to this that we now turn.

**Implicit critical realism**

One of the strengths of critical realism is its coherence with common sense views of the world (Bhaskar and Hartwig 2016). We would hope, for example, that most lay people would agree that slavery is real, oppressive and exploitative (even when we don't know about it), that its oppressive nature rests on material, psychological and social controls, that it is always morally wrong, that it has damaging effects upon the bodies and minds of individuals as well as the fabric of society, that it involves the relations of individuals, groups, institutions, and organisations, and that, in certain contexts, some people, groups and organisations can resist it in a variety of ways. Yet, in the proclamations of post-foundational meta-theory such statements become problematic, as they are underpinned by concepts such as entities with properties, potential and actualised powers, stratification, a distinction between ontology and epistemology, and a non-relativist commitment to truth and morality.

Common sense, however, has a way of sneaking into even the most recondite and abstruse theorising, even when it is critical realist principles have been explicitly rejected. Critical realism has, therefore, been shown to be compatible with, and to arguably underpin, a variety of approaches that have ostensibly eschewed realism, such as constructivism, interpretivism and Actor-Network Theory (O'Mahoney 2016, O'Mahoney et al. 2016). This revisionism has not only allowed critical realists to reclaim concepts such as discourse (Fairclough 2005), identity (O'Mahoney and Marks 2014) or socio-materiality (Mutch 2013), but also to argue that theorists such as Foucault, Derrida, Latour and Lacan who are commonly (mis)used by post-foundational business academics, are more critical realist than post-structuralist in their thinking (Caldwell 2007, Pearce and Woodiwiss 2001, Wright 2004, Clarke 2003).

A similar argument might be made of empiricist approaches. In pragmatic terms, many empiricist approaches identify a 'problem' (i.e. lack of relative emancipation) and offer 'solutions' (i.e. what needs to happen to reduce oppression) with minimal recourse to meta-theory. Industrial relations researchers often detail empirical traces between phenomena, such as the existence of 'strong' regulatory mechanisms in a specific context, and the relative emancipation evident in emergent events, using empirical data about, for example, pay-levels, employee wellbeing or inter-personal trust. Thus, much industrial relations writing has been argued by (Edwards 2005) to be implicitly critical realist. In the words of the sociologist Harry Collins, 'I often wonder if this isn't just solid, traditional sociological research?' (personal communication).

**Towards an emancipatory critical realist agenda: challenges and opportunities**

We have, above, sought to highlight those studies which use critical realism to develop insightful empirical analyses on oppression, resistance and emancipation. Yet, despite its theoretical capacity

for exploring these themes, critical realist studies tend to focus at the level of theory (for example, Reed 2001, Newton 1998, Fleetwood 2005) rather than empirics. Where empirical work *has* been done, it too often focuses on rather detached and passive analyses of oppression and resistance, critique, rather than engaged with processes of emancipation (Ackroyd and Karlsson 2015). Why is this?

To some extent critical realism is a victim of its relative newness. It was only established in the late seventies, but only really entered organisation studies with any confidence after the turn of the millennium. Yet novelty is hardly a major impediment to popularity in organisation studies, indeed, many might argue the converse. Another reason may be found in its commitments, and indeed, the language of those commitments. Critical realism is proudly essentialist, in an academic context which uses the word as a shorthand for oppressive patriarchal and colonialist studies. Moreover, the stark language and industrial images it deploys ('transfactual mechanisms' anyone?) can off-putting to academics more comfortable with ambiguous narratives.

Still, there is more to the limitations of critical realism than its newness and language. Not only have several people have pointed to chinks in its ontological architecture (Al-Amoudi and Willmott 2011) but opponents are rightly suspicious of the arrogance implicit in critical realist claims to superior knowledge. For example, at the heart of critical realist identification of transfactual mechanisms lies retroduction: asking what must the world be like for our observations to hold true. Whilst this movement is plausible with larger paradigmatic programmes (for example, 'science'), in smaller projects it sometimes seems a weaker form of analysis than induction or deduction. Indeed, it sometimes appears that the 'judgemental rationality' that is supposed to select the best of competing explanations coincides neatly with the most favoured or familiar approach of the author.

Yet, whilst it is flawed and still very much a work in progress, we would argue that critical realism provides the best basis for identifying forms of oppression and resistance and pointing to possibilities for emancipation. Moreover, we would argue that the theoretical resources offered by critical realism to understanding oppression and emancipation have not yet been exploited fully. To highlight one example, we would argue that Bhaskar's work on dialectics and absence has great potential, but has not yet been harnessed in understanding the absences and presences of oppression in the workplace.

Here, we have the pleasure of introducing two papers which we feel have grasped the opportunities to study oppression and emancipation using critical realist principles. The first, by Martinez Dy, Lee Martin and Susan Marlow interrogates the common assumption that digital emancipation offers women emancipation from economic marginalisation, and finds it wanting. Highlighting embeddedness of entrepreneurship in gendered, race and class structures, they show that agency is as constrained in the on-line as it is in the off-line world. The second, by Anne Touboulic and colleagues examines the construction of coffee farmers by Unilever in promotional videos through critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2005). They show that even in promotional videos aimed at celebrating the empowering practices of Unilever, structural issues of race and gender are embedded and reproduced, and emphasise the inequalities of power and resources that enable such representation.

We hope that these papers illustrate that critical realism can develop a more structured and consistent narrative about the nature of the social world, and that its philosophical underpinning can provide richer and more powerful explanations of *why* oppression occurs and *how* emancipation might be possible. It is for this reason that despite its flaws and challenges, we believe it is a project worth pursuing and developing.

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